Special Issue: How They Lie About Laos

That's Telling Them

"Reds Call Laos Drive Stalled."—Reuters *in* Baltimore Sun *February 25*
"Laird Says Drive Has Paused, Not Stalled."—*Same Paper, Same Day*

I. F. Stone's Bi-Weekly

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The Military Machine Is In Command

Nothing had changed. There were the same star-studded, medal-bedecked uniforms, but on different generals. The same top-secret confidential charts and the same self-assured masculine tones explaining exactly how we were winning the war to save the fighting little democracy of South Vietnam. It was like the old movie on the late late show. And President Nixon looked in admiration at his generals like a football player looks at his hero coach—just like Lyndon Johnson did.

—Rep. Rees (D. Calif.)*—a World War II infantryman—describing a White House briefing for Congressmen Feb. 18.*

The first problem raised by the Laotian invasion was how to get the ARVN troops in. Now it looks as if the next—and harder—problem will be how to get them out. On Feb. 24 Secretary Laird assured a press conference that the ARVN forces were "achieving their objective . . . The initiative no longer belongs to the enemy." But as this was written on March 1, the South Vietnamese troops had just abandoned their fifth base in a week. ARVN troops had to flee on foot carrying their wounded from one base "because heavy anti-aircraft fire," according to the UPI (*Wash. Star,* March 1), "prevented U.S. helicopters from dropping supplies or evacuating the wounded." Airpower is again proving indecisive.

This Time It's The Failure of Tactical Air

The invasion was attempted because even the heaviest bombardment in history (see footnote p. 3) had failed to cut enemy supply lines on the Ho Chi Minh trail. Interdiction having failed, it was hoped that overwhelming airpower, applied tactically in support of ground troops, would make it possible to cut the trail on the ground. The U.S. mustered what seems to be the biggest concentration of helicopters in the history of warfare. Their sheer number was supposed to add an entirely new dimension to the conflict. It was hoped that they could not only supply and succor the ARVN troops on the ground but use the invaders as bait and then clobber their attackers from the air. Route 9, the road into Laos, had been rendered unsafe by enemy ambushes so the plan was to establish fire bases to the north and south of it to secure the road. Gunships were to protect these fire bases from attack while helicopters dropped supplies and picked up the wounded. Now it looks as if airpower is failing tactically, as it has already failed at interdiction.

The consequences may be far-reaching. The helicopter was supposed to be technology's answer to insurgency, the weapon of the *uebermensch* in developed societies against those lesser breeds in the underdeveloped world unwise enough to revolt against him. Now it looks as if heavy ground fire pays off enormously against the helicopters, which are very vulnerable, and even against fighter-bombers. Cost effectiveness—in McNamara's lingo—seems to be on the side of the "natives."

On The Credibility Of Generals

"I have been disturbed by reports, usually attributable to a junior officer in the field that this operation has bogged down."

—Lt. Gen. Vogt at a Pentagon briefing, Feb. 24.

M. Francois Sully covered the Indochina war as a combat correspondent. He was one of the last correspondents to leave the doomed fortress at Dienbienphu and later loved to tell of his experience there—one of the many that led him to believe that the way to cover a war was to talk to the privates, not generals. On his arrival at Dienbienphu, he recalled, he was briefed by a French general on the impregnability of the fortress, the military weakness of the Vietminh, the Communist enemy, and the assured French victory. But in wandering around the camp, M. Sully remembered, he asked an old Foreign Legion sergeant for his opinion of the situation; the sergeant looked around at the mountains rimming Dienbienphu, where the Vietminh were gathering, and said: "It's a stink hole."

—From M. Sully's obituary *New York Times* Feb. 24

Ammunition and anti-aircraft guns are cheap while helicopters and their pilots are expensive. The fighting in Laos is destroying the Buck Rogers delusion behind the Nixon Doctrine, in which Asians fight Asians on the ground while we, the supermen, ensure victory for our side from the air. In *extremis* the helicopter was also counted on to evacuate ARVN troops if a retreat proved necessary. Evacuating demoralized and wounded troops under heavy ground fire is more difficult than dropping supplies. Dunkirk and Dien Bien Phu must appear in the nightmares of the generals. As more U.S. helicopters are shot down, and we begin to drop ground troops for "protective encirclement" (the Pentagon's latest semantic invention) to rescue their pilots, what happens when the rescuers have to be rescued?

Some of ARVN's best battalions have already been chewed up in Laos. We are rushing more ARVN troops and more U.S. helicopter into the battle. But this is one the enemy can afford to lose more easily than we can. They can withdraw and wait for the next dry season. But a serious setback for ARVN could upset our plans to get Thieu reelected President next Fall. Already "Big" Minh, the chief hope of the anti-war forces in Saigon, usually super-cautious, is quoted as saying (*New York Times,* Feb. 28), that the Laotian operation could have a "disintegrating effect on the army as a whole," adding that it performs best "when it fights for the defense of the fatherland, not for any other purpose and least of all for the purpose of invasion." The crafty old opportunist must scent a crisis ahead; he has been quiet for weeks. Nixon cannot present Vietnamization as a success in his own fight for re-

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How Do You Cut The Ho Chi Minh Trail Without Reaching Its Hub?...

"The operation—and I read a complete report from General Abrams this morning—has gone according to plan. The South Vietnamese have already cut three major roads—when we call them roads, let's say trails—which led from Tchepone down into Cambodia and, of course, into South Vietnam . . . The Cambodia action in May and June cut one lifeline . . . This action would either cut or seriously disrupt the other pipeline or lifeline, the lifeline coming down through Laos, the Ho Chi Minh trail . . . The North Vietnamese . . . have to fight here or give up the struggle."

—President Nixon at his news conference of Feb. 17.

Five days later, when it was clear that South Vietnamese troops were stalled more than 10 miles east of Tchepone (or Sepone), government officials denied that this was a major objective, but declined to do so on the record or permit the press to identify their Department. When they were asked how the traffic could be choked off without taking Tchepone, they acknowledged an apparent contradiction. Another correspondent asked: in view of the fact that Sepone has been called the "Grand Central Station" of the Ho Chi Minh trail complex, could the operation be regarded as a success if it did not get through to Sepone, or cut the trails to the north or south of it? The spokesman replied (direct quotation forbidden) that he didn't think that you could judge this operation not to have been a success if it doesn't go to Sepone. There was hilarity over this triple negative.

Two days later Secretary Laird held a Pentagon press conference (with Lt. Gen. Vogt, of the Joint Chiefs of Staff), saying that he (Laird) always had "felt that the American public was entitled to the straight facts." The reader can judge for himself how "straight" were the "facts" he gave:

From The Pentagon Transcript

Q. How disappointed would you gentlemen be, if at all, if the transportation complex at Sepone was not broken up by the ARVN?

LAIRD. I don't know what you refer to as a complex. There are certain roads that cross there.

Q. The White House has called it a great transshipment point.

LAIRD. Sepone, as such, has never been an objective . . .

Q. The general [Vogt] has just identified it as a chief transshipment point.

LAIRD. It is a hub as far as the road network is concerned. I think that's the important thing to bear in mind.

Q. If they don't reach that hub, would you be disappointed?

LAIRD. I think we should hear from General Vogt on that.

VOGT. I think a key to the answer to that question is, does the enemy in fact intend and will he make use of the artery systems that go to the west of the Sepone area. As I have indicated, there is no evidence that he is moving in that direction. If he does and he makes major use of those roads to the west, then, obviously, we'll have to take some action against it . . .

Q. Is it a key thing to break up the hub which was described by the General near Sepone?

LAIRD. The key thing is to disrupt the logistics supply routes and I have always made that very clear in repeating any briefings that I have had. I believe that this operation, even if it were to terminate—and there is no time limit, fixed time limit on it—now has been successful in disrupting the logistics supplies.

Q. Mr. Secretary, how can you say you have disrupted it if you have no remote idea how much of the traffic you have stopped?

LAIRD. We have made it substantially more difficult for them to use this road network. We will have those appraisals. I don't like to give specific numbers of tons until we have evaluated the intelligence, and we will be making those evaluations. I believe that it's better from the standpoint of the credibility of this Department . . .

Q. Mr. Secretary, are you saying in effect, if I understand what has been transmitted this morning, that the field reports

Even Dead Cows Body-Counted

The defendant [Calley] suggested another possible incentive for what happened at Mylai—the pressure to produce "a high body count" in Vietnam combat. "The division was pressing for it," Calley recalled, "because they wanted to get the Americal Division up to the standards of the other divisions that had been there for a longer period of time. And, of course, every company was competing with body counts." The platoon leader clearly thought it was an absurd way to measure the war's progress. "There is no way to really figure out exactly a body count," he said. "At that time, anything went into a body count—VC, buffalo, pigs, cows, anything dead, you put into your body count."

—Wm. Greider in the *Washington Post*, Feb. 24

After the shooting stopped, he and the other officers of Charlie Company lunched together and chatted about a "body count" for the mission. "Off the top of my head," Calley said he estimated 30 to 40 for his platoon. But the company commander generously gave him credit for 50.—*Same, from the Calley trial Feb 25*

Veteran War Correspondent On Statistical Fakery In The Mekong Delta "Pacification"

The U.S. command reports that Vinh Long's Vietnamization is moving along, that U.S. troops are pulling out steadily, and that only 20,000 U.S. troops remain in the Mekong Delta. What the command didn't report was that in 1967 the U.S. had only 4,000 troops in the Delta—now there are five times that many.

Saigon forces now carry the bulk of the fighting and operate also at night, according to the military briefings. If you talk to American advisors in the field, you find out however that there is little contact with the NLF. Saigon troops are now required to make nightly forays into the jungle, so they go out a few yards every night sometime between 10 p.m. and midnight, usually along the same path, and then return. If any ammunition is expended in one of these forays, it is reported as an ambush by the South Vietnamese troops. In one district, out of 1200 night-time ambushes, only three involved any firing of guns, and no one knows what the targets of the shots were.

The U.S. Army claims that 92% of the Mekong Delta is pacified, meaning that the people in control of the villages are loyal to the Saigon government. Such figures are really the product of statisticalization of the war.

The American computer names one Vinh Long hamlet a Class B pacified hamlet—not quite Class A, but highly pacified. Not long before, the villagers had assassinated the hamlet chief and his deputy—both of whom worked for Saigon. In an average month, a district advisor must feed the answers to 5,379 multiple choice questions into the computer in Saigon. In one district the senior advisor had visited only 25 of 43 hamlets and yet had filled out scores of reports on each one.

—Harvey Myerson, former Chicago Daily News *war correspondent, author of a book on Vinh Long in Vietnam (Houghton-Mifflin, 1970) now a teacher at the Univ. of Hawaii, reports over KPOI-FM in Honolulu on a revisit to the province (Liberation News Service).*

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. . . The Fibs and The Fluster As The Drive For Tchepone Bogged Down

that are being filed by the correspondents in Vietnam about an operation that has bogged down 16 to 17 miles inside Laos are incorrect and, in fact, that the South Vietnamese forces have stopped because their immediate objectives have been achieved, have been obtained, and not weather or the enemy have necessitated that stoppage and that these reports from the field are incorrect?

First Dodge, Then Deny

LAIRD. I would only state that the objective of disrupting the logistics routes is being achieved. Now if the enemy should react and use route 23 or some other route to the west of the complex that has been used, then a decision will be made at that time, I am sure, by the South Vietnamese.

Q. You don't consider the operation bogged down now, to use the term of the journalists over there?

LAIRD. No. The operation is going according to plan.

Q. Mr. Secretary, is it possible that the enemy is not using route 23 because they don't have to, they are still getting everything they need down the present course? Are you not exaggerating the importance of what has gone on up to now?

LAIRD. I hope I haven't exaggerated it. I have tried to face up to the realities of the situation . . .

Q. Mr. Secretary, from all of this information would it be fair to come to this conclusion: That with all our air power and with all our electronic devices, sensors, that it is not possible with those means alone, air power plus electronics, to stop the flow of traffic down the Ho Chi Minh Trail during the dry season?

LAIRD. The best means of interdiction that has ever been developed militarily, and the surest, is by ground forces. With all apologies to the United States Air Force, ground interdiction is still the surest way of accomplishing this kind of objective.*

Q. Mr. Secretary, if 92 is impassible, as the general said, and 23 is not being used, as the general said, has the flow of supplies been reduced?

LAIRD. Yes. That is a different question than the number of tons. They have been reduced, yes.

Q. Is it different than the number of tons?

LAIRD. I was asked for the specific number of tons.

Q. No, sir, you were not. You were asked whether it was roughly half, a quarter or three-quarters.

LAIRD. It has been reduced.

On Those Helicopter Statistics

Khe Sanh—Some of the heaviest antiaircraft fire of the war is downing an average of 10 American helicopters a day pilots here report. . . . To date the U.S. command in Saigon has announced the loss of 29 helicopters in combat since the invasion began Feb. 8—18 in Laos, 11 in South Vietnam . . . But the command figures do not include helicopters that are shot down and later recovered. Pilots and other military sources believe this category includes a third or more of the estimated fleet of 500-plus helicopters to support the Laos invasion . . . Pilots earlier this week were ordered by the command not to discuss downed but salvaged helicopters with newsmen.

—Michael Parks in the *Baltimore Sun* Feb. 25

Said one American Colonel: "If they can cut the tail number out of the wreckage and glue a new chopper to it, they'll never admit the aircraft was lost."

—*Newsweek*: Indochina, the New Optimism March 1

Q. By what percentage? [No answer]

Q. Is there not another route between 914 and 23 known, I believe, as 234?

VOGT. It is not passable to trucks. They can get one or two vehicles through a day. It's an extremely rough terrain.

Q. Aside from the military operations, can you say whether or not the military achievements so far have compensated for the political disadvantages, that is, the criticism in this country?

LAIRD. Yes, I think it has, because I feel confident that it has insured our troop withdrawal schedule. . . .

*** "The Ho Chi Minh trail," the UPI reported from Saigon (Wash. Daily News, Feb. 2), "has withstood more bombs than allies dropped on Nazi Germany in World War II . . . The road network and the supplies survive despite . . . 300 to 400 missions a day by jet fighter-bombers and waves of B-52s, each capable of dropping 30 tons of bombs on a specific target." For a glimpse of the limitations of airpower in tactical support see Alvin Schuster's report from Saigon in the New York Times, Feb. 27 where he quotes a South Vietnamese officer at a forward command post near Khesanh as saying, "The symptoms are very bad. This is not because of our lack of ability to fight at the hill but because of the almost total ineffectiveness of American airpower." These limitations were also evident in the Korean war both in interdiction and tactical support.**

7th Air Force Commander In Southeast Asia Contradicts Laird On A Vital Point

BOB SCHIEFFER [CBS Reporter]: Mr. Secretary, there will be another dry season next year. Will that require another South Vietnamese operation into Laos to interdict supplies?

SECRETARY LAIRD: Well, that would be a matter that would certainly be up to the South Vietnamese. I would—to be very frank with you they will even have a greater capability to carry on those kind of operations next year.

SCHIEFFER: As I understand it there's no plan now to train or equip the South Vietnamese to handle this bombing of the Ho Chi Minh Trail in Laos once the United States stops that. What do you do about that? Does the United States just stay there? Will we be required to stay there and bomb as long as the North Vietnamese send supplies—

LAIRD: I don't know where you got your information that they weren't being prepared in this area, but we are turning over the gunships, we also are using the A-1s and other types of aircraft that can carry on a very effective interdiction campaign as far as the South Vietnamese are concerned.

SCHIEFFER: You're telling me that that plan is already underway?

LAIRD: The plan is underway to give the South Vietnamese Air Force an interdiction capability.

—CBS News special report, February 16.

CHARLES COLLINGWOOD [CBS Reporter]: Do we contemplate training and equipping the South Vietnamese eventually to undertake the interdiction missions that we are now flying in Laos and Cambodia?

GEN. LUCIUS CLAY, JR. [Commander, 7th Air Force in S.E. Asia]: No, sir, we're not. Basically, the Vietnamese Air Force is being trained to handle the insurgency problem within the country, within the Republic of Vietnam. As you may know, the fighter aircraft we are leaving with the Vietnamese Air Force are basically A-1s and A-37s; basically short range, close-support type airplanes. So we're not leaving heavy carriers of ordnance, long-range type airplanes, which are the kind necessary if you're going to be operating in the trails of Laos and outside the Republic of Vietnam.—*Interview on the same CBS program.*

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(Continued from Page One)

election in 1972 if some variety of neutralist—after all the agony—should win the Presidency in South Vietnam. After Cambodia and Laos, what will be Nixon's next gamble? What will the military sell him next?

Why The Pax Americana

Every indicator, from events in Indochina to the new State of the World message, demonstrates that the military machine is in command. The reasons for this are many. The most obvious is the impatience which domestic politics imposes on Nixon, and his emotional commitment to victory. This makes him an easy mark for any quick fix in the military salesman's bag of contingency plans. The basic reason lies in the sheer inertial mass of our huge military establishment, the biggest and most murderous the world has ever seen. The means has become the end. It is not political doctrine which determines military size but military size which determines doctrine.

The banner headline in *U.S. News & World Report* for March 8 sums up the impression the Nixon Doctrine is intended to create: "A Changing U.S. Role in the World: The Nixon Concept". But under the shift in tone and tactics—the soft-sell—the course set by the new message is still the same course on which the U.S. embarked with the Truman Doctrine in 1947 and its reaffirmance for Asia in the Johnson Doctrine of 1967. The whole non-Communist world is declared an American protectorate and preserve, as Latin America—to its sorrow—has been for a century and a half under the Monroe Doctrine. The only difference in the Nixon Doctrine is its revival of the Dulles hope that we could enlist Asians to fight Asians. Significantly, this is not extended to Western Europe; there Nixon does not suggest any scaling down in U.S. troops; there he asks our NATO allies only for a stepup in conventional arms expenditure. The smug official line is that we give Asians the arms to defend their freedom. The reality, visible in the Calley trial in all its racial rawness, is that dinks, slopes, slant-eyes and gooks are cheap and expendable—as "wastable" as Kleenex for mine-detection and other sanitary tasks. And we are being brain-washed into the moral imbecility required for this imperial operation by the Pentagon's propaganda machine.*

Almost everything Nixon says in the new message and the radio address explaining it is more safely read in reverse.

National Survival Or National Suicide?

South Vietnam now has an excellent opportunity not only to survive but to build a strong free society.

—From Nixon's address on foreign policy, Feb. 25.

It is Asians now fighting Asians—and they do it for our purposes more than their own. What regard do we have for them, for those villages, those children, those women, those soldiers? The are merely Asians fighting Asians, and if luck smiles upon us in this great game of life and death in Southeast Asia, we will reap the political benefits from this new ante on the war's table—the political benefit that will keep America cool, while Vietnam falls deeper into the pit, her armies in three theaters, her future more dismal.

—Senator Kennedy, to the Business Executives Move for Peace, Feb. 17, text, Con. Rec. S1539, Feb. 18.

That "generation of peace" he promises is a generation of arms race, tension and war. Events in the short run and doctrine in the long run point toward war with China. China is mobilizing its people now in huge rallies in every major city for the possibility of intervening in Indochina if Nixon's next gamble brings our forces closer to its borders. Though Nixon has promised not to use "tactical nuclear weapons" in North Vietnam, there is little doubt that strategic nuclear weapons would be used in the event of war with China. That is the holocaust which can still be prevented if Congress votes to ban U.S. troops in North Vietnam and for the McGovern-Hatfield bill to bring home our troops by the end of this year. But the perspectives of the peace movement must go beyond Vietnam. Implicit in the Nixon message are more Vietnams, preparation for "limited nuclear war" and an intensification of the nuclear arms race. The SALT talks are a mere holding operation, disarming public opinion while we go ahead with ABM and MIRV, and prepare new monsters of destruction. We are trapped by militarism and imperialism. These, and the ancient sanguinary habits of mankind, are the enemy.

*** That CBS should dare to expose this so brilliantly in its "Selling of the Pentagon," Feb. 23 was an event of prime importance. For a fuller view we recommend highly Senator Fulbright's new book, The Pentagon Propaganda Machine, a main source for the CBS show.**

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